



Parsnip

Plant parsnips where you won't need to disturb them for a while: They take up to 150 days to mature and as long as a year to perfect their flavor. They'll perform beautifully in most any kind of soil, but a pH of 6.2 to 7.2 ensures the best root development.

Dig the soil to at least 18 inches for short varieties, 2 feet for longer ones, and remove stones and other debris that could hamper root growth. Add plenty of organic matter (ideally compost), and avoid any soil amendments high in nitrogen.

Start from seed sown in early spring, as soon as the ground can be worked. (Like most root vegetables, parsnips are rarely if ever sold as started plants.) In warm climates, plant in early fall and harvest the following spring.

Soak seeds in water overnight to speed germination, then sow them thickly 1/2 inch deep in rows 18 inches apart. Be patient: The seeds will take three to four weeks to germinate in soil temperatures of 50 degrees F.

Thin seedlings to 4 inches apart, then mulch to suppress weeds and conserve moisture. Don't stint on the distance - crowded plants won't develop properly.

Give plants at least an inch of water a week to ensure tender roots. At about the middle of the growing season, side-dress with compost and spray the plants with compost tea.

Start digging parsnips as soon as they're big enough to use, but for the best flavor wait till the first few frosts have struck. In cold regions, mulch heavily to extend the fall harvest period.

Prepare the plot for overwintering by topping it with at least a foot of straw, leaves or other loose mulch as soon as you hear forecasts for the first hard freeze. Dig overwintered roots in early spring before new growth starts - once the tops start growing, flavor deteriorates.

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